

J. M. Follen

THE EXCLUSIVE PRINCIPLE CONSIDERED.

TWO SERMONS

ON

CHRISTIAN UNION,

AND

THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPELS.

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NOTE.

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S E R M O N I .

ROM. VIII. 9.

NOW IF ANY MAN HAVE NOT THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST, HE IS NONE OF HIS.

I HAVE recently upon more than one occasion endeavored to enforce what seems to me a principle of the first importance, namely, that Christianity is not a form but a spirit. And by this I have meant, as I have said, not merely that Christianity is not a form of worship, or a form of words, but further, that it is not a form of thought. And by a form of thought, I mean an opinion, or set of opinions, the result of a mere intellectual process. But Christianity is a spirit. It is a life which manifests itself not in those views which a man avows as the conclusions of his understanding, and which admit of being stated in words, be they correct or false, but in the prevailing temper of the man. A spirit of truth, of justice, of freedom, of love, manifesting itself, not in one particular way, but in all the ways in which a man shows what manner of man he is,—this it is by which an individual proves that he is in sympathy with Christ. He may have very singular opinions all the while, and very false opinions, as it seems to us, upon what we consider points of very great moment, and yet if he evinces a love of what is just and true, we are to hold him a Christian brother, wearing a spiritual resemblance to Jesus Christ. And we are not to take those opinions of his, which seem erroneous

to us, as the only, or as the chief tests of his spirit. The methods are innumerable by which we are to ascertain what spirit a man is of. His daily life and conversation, his whole manner of dealing with his fellow-men, his habitual deportment, the whole man shows us what he is. And we are to judge not partially and superficially, but charitably and justly, and take not his professions, not his words, but his spirit as his grand Christian qualification.

It seems to me that this is the great principle of Religion — of Christianity. What is it that makes Christ himself appear so glorious, so divine in our eyes! His Spirit. It is not any one particular thing that he said or did. His words — they are simple and eloquent, but words of similar import have been uttered in the world before and since his time. It is the spirit, which filled those words, that makes them so large and commanding in our ears. His miracles — they were wonderful demonstrations of power, — but still it was the spirit in which they were wrought, that renders them the works of God in our view. His death — it was a death of torture, but others have suffered physical pain as severe — it was the spirit with which he suffered: this it is that glorified his cross and will glorify it forever.

Is it not so, my hearers? The spirit of Christ, the life of his heart and soul, which manifested itself outwardly in his whole manner of bearing himself, which made him merciful and just and self-sacrificing and holy — this it is that looks so beautiful, and godlike in him, and has given him such an empire in the inmost heart of the world.

And what was it that he sought to do? What was the aim of all his words, works and sufferings? Was it not to breathe his spirit into the world? He lived for the enlightening of the intellect, it is true, but this was not his first, his principal purpose. His grand concern was with the human heart, to renew that, by communicating to it a new spirit, by awakening in it new dispositions, new affections. The appeal which he made was directly to the hearts of men. It is upon the pure, and the humble, and the merciful, and the peace-loving that he pours out his benedictions. Again and again, he said

that all Religion consisted in love, in the love of God and man. Now love is not a matter of the intellect. It is a spirit, a life in the heart, a feeling, an affection. When one asked him what he should do to inherit eternal life, Christ did not stop to discourse to him about matters of faith, about points within the province of the understanding only, but he bade him go away and treat his neighbor as he would be treated himself. He did not wish men to cry Lord, Lord, to him, but his language is, "Do the will of my Father in Heaven, and his will is that you should love him with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself, and you will then be able to distinguish what is from Heaven, and what is of earth." "He that keepeth my commandments (and his commandments were the eternal laws of God, written in the hearts of all men,) he it is that loveth me." "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, — by what? By the soundness of your creed? By the correctness of your views of my nature, or my miracles? Oh no, but by the love you cherish one toward another." It was in the very spirit of Christ that the Apostle declares, as in our text, "If any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his." Recollect how Jesus talked to his personal friends, just before his death. They were afflicted at the prospect of being separated from him, and to comfort them, he told them that they should have another guide and comforter, who would be to them all that he had been and more, and what was that other comforter? Why, it was simply "the spirit of truth," a true spirit. That, he declared, would be all-sufficient to enlighten their minds, to guide them through all difficulties, and sustain them under all sorrows, and lead them to everlasting peace. And do we not fully recognize the perfect truth of this declaration? What is it that man needs to guide him through life, through all its temptations and perils, but a right spirit, not a spirit of fear, or a spirit of pride, or a spirit of selfishness, but a spirit of truth, and rectitude, and purity, and love. He does not require a creed as he requires a spirit. The most rational and scriptural views concerning God and Jesus Christ and the duty and destiny of man would be of no use to him, unless his spirit were a true spirit. And if he

has such a spirit, his understanding may be obscured by many errors, and they may seem great errors to us — he may have false views of what we call the doctrines of Religion, he may be ignorant of what we call religious truth, yet he has a light in his heart. He honestly desires to see things as they are. His ruling object is to be just and charitable, and in these dispositions is his salvation ; and here is his Christianity, here is the mark of his relationship to Christ. My friends, the spirit of a man is everything. It is the light, and power, and holiness of God in the human soul. It is God inspiring, guiding, protecting the frail creature whom he has placed here in the midst of the infinitude of his works. Let us see a pure, honest, loving spirit in a man, and we will receive him, shall we not? as a friend and brother, worthy of all confidence and respect, whatever religious name he bears, and even if he bear no religious name.

The doctrine, which I have now endeavored to set forth, receives to a certain extent the assent of all who call themselves Christians. All admit that the spirit, tone, habit of a man is of quite indispensable moment, that if his spirit is false, nothing else that he has, no soundness of faith and opinion, is of the slightest worth to him. But although the truth I have stated is thus universally assented to, yet very few accept it to the uttermost limit of its application — in all its length and breadth. How stands it with our religious denomination — with us, Unitarians, liberal Christians as we call ourselves? Are we faithful to this great principle of the supremacy of the spirit over the letter?

My friends, Unitarian Christianity has now reached a period in its history when this question is to be asked and answered. And we have to make up our minds and come to an understanding with ourselves. Hitherto the contest of liberal Christianity has been with orthodoxy, and Unitarians have been the assertors of freedom of conscience and inquiry, and Christian charity, and, in the ardor of our liberality, we have insisted over and over again, that whether a man believe in the trinity or the unity of God, whether he receive the tenets of the orthodox faith or reject them, is a small matter, if he only

has a free, honest, charitable temper. We have taken up the noble doctrine of the Apostle, and declared that without a charitable spirit a man is nothing, though he have all faith so that he could remove mountains, and that with charity he is all, whatever may be the errors of his understanding. So far we have done well. To those who believe more than we do, we have been disposed to extend the utmost liberality. We have been ready to admit them into our pulpits, even though they refused to accord the same courtesy to us. But how is it with those who have recently appeared in our own body, who believe less than we do?

We shall obtain something like an answer to this question by looking at the state of things which has arisen among Unitarian Christians in that part of our country where Unitarianism flourishes in the greatest strength. Separated as this religious society is from the great body of those, to whom we most nearly approximate in matters of religious faith, there may be many of my hearers only slightly or not at all informed as to the circumstances to which I refer. Let me therefore for your information, state the case which has arisen.

The chief strength of our religious denomination is, you know, in New England, in Boston and its vicinity. There our brethren have been asserting, for some thirty years back, the great principle of religious liberty. They have insisted distinctly and eloquently upon the right and duty of private judgment. It has followed as a natural consequence, that all, the younger members of our body especially, have sought to exercise this right and discharge this duty. Being taught to prove all things, to judge for themselves, to abjure all human authority in the sacred subject of religion, they have endeavored to follow this teaching, and they have arrived, in the exercise of this freedom, at certain conclusions, which they consider, no doubt, as in advance of the views of Unitarians generally, and which, at all events, differ materially from the modes of thought generally received among us. Among these free inquirers, is a clergyman, Theodore Parker, settled at West Roxbury, about six miles from Boston, to whose character, talents, learning and devotedness, all parties unite in pay-

ing the homage of their respect. He has expressed his peculiar opinions with great freedom and boldness, both in the pulpit and through the press. He writes with a stirring eloquence, and is listened to by large numbers with great interest, and many who were once skeptical, have had awakened in them a new sense of the worth and solemnity of the vital principles of religion. But the course he has pursued, has excited very great alarm among those denominated liberal Christians.

The custom of exchanging pulpits prevails, as you probably know, more generally in Boston and its vicinity than elsewhere. There a minister seldom preaches much more than half the time in his own pulpit. This custom of exchanging has its advantages. It had its origin in mere courtesy ; still it has become so well established that it is considered a mark of Christian fellowship. Of this courtesy, Mr. Parker has ceased, almost entirely, to be an object. Nearly all the Unitarian pulpits have been closed against him. Numbers go out of Boston almost every Sunday to hear him in his own church. Thus things have gone on. But recently Mr. Sargent, one of the ministers of the poor who are supported, and whose churches have been built by the associated Unitarian churches of Boston, ventured to exchange with Mr. Parker ; a step which occasioned so strong an expression of disapproval from the friends and supporters of the ministry of the poor, that Mr. Sargent has thought fit to resign his situation, and the whole matter has produced no small stir. Another of our brethren, Mr. Clarke, has expressed his wish, and, I believe, his intention to exchange with Mr. Parker, and this has added to the interest which is felt in the present position of things.

Now, my friends, I have stated this case to you, not merely for your information, or to gratify an idle curiosity, but because I believe it to be your duty and mine to form an opinion upon this subject. This is our duty as men, as Christians, as professors of liberal Christianity. And furthermore, I wish you to look at this case, side by side, with that Christian principle, which it is the aim of this discourse to exhibit. The spirit of Theodore Parker, as a man, as an honest seeker of truth, as a

faithful and eloquent preacher of the great moral principles which constituted the sum and substance of the preaching of Christ himself, is unquestioned. All recognize — all admit it. He gives evidence then of that spirit which is the only true badge of Christian discipleship. It is of little moment, comparatively, what he thinks upon certain points, or what he says; his life bears witness for him. The boldness with which he has avowed his honest convictions, affords some presumption of his love of truth, that spirit which led Christ to encounter the opposition of the world.

For my own part, I cannot help feeling very deeply, that in withdrawing from him the courtesy of an occasional exchange our brethren at the Eastward fall short of those large principles of religious liberty which they have been for years so eloquently asserting. They have placed themselves in a false position. Have they not taken the very same attitude toward this, their brother, which their orthodox brethren took towards them some thirty years since? To be sure they are not quite so denunciatory. They are not, it may be, denunciatory at all. But then the orthodox themselves were not so violent against Unitarians, as the old Catholic church was against the first who ventured to dissent from her opinions. Still, in Catholics and in the orthodox, one and the same exclusive spirit was discernible; and now we grieve to add, even those who style themselves liberal Christians, are giving evidence of that same spirit. They have had charity and to spare for those who believe more than they do. But for those who believe less, the mantle of their liberality is all too narrow. They have abjured the authority of written creeds. They have insisted that, however great faith is, charity is far greater. But now, it appears, that Unitarians have a creed after all, an unwritten creed, to be sure, but still a creed, from which he who dissents is expected to withdraw from their fellowship. It appears to me very plainly, that this is all wrong, radically wrong; wrong in principle. Christianity is not a form of opinion, but a spirit. The kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.

And besides, I account it a manifest insult to truth to fear the slightest breath of error. If Mr. Parker is wrong, he can

be shown to be wrong. If what he says is a delusion of his own brain, what can it avail against the truth of Almighty God? I care not what his talents and learning and eloquence may be, they are all but dust in the balance against the divine force of truth. Give him a fair field then, and see how Truth shall triumph. It is admitted, I believe, that he says a great deal of truth, and says it exceedingly well to the edifying of the souls of his hearers. He is listened to with seriousness by very serious-minded persons. It is only occasionally, not always and throughout, in all his discourses, that he is held to inculcate what is erroneous. Have we any sense of the greatness of truth then, when we stand in dread of such brief and occasional statements of what we consider error?

Ah, but, it will be said, the faith of people will be shaken by such statements. Then I say, that a faith so easily shaken, must be shaking already. It cannot deserve the name of faith. It can have no root in personal conviction. And the sooner it is shaken all to pieces, the better. There will then be room and necessity for the formation of a better grounded faith. This dread of new opinions proves, I fear, not an attachment to the truth, but the unbelief of those who cherish it. They feel that the ground is not firm under their feet, that they are standing, not upon the solid rock of the everlasting mountain, but upon an avalanche of snow, which the slightest concussion of the air, even so much as may be occasioned by a mere whisper, will send tumbling down into the abyss.

Possibly, it may be said, that Mr. Parker's views are very plausible; that he sets them forth with great power; that they are made in his hands to look very much like truth, and that therefore he is not to be listened to. If such be the case, who are they who will venture to assume the responsibility of standing between him and the public, and of preventing, as far as in them lies, his access to the public ear? Certainly not those, they are not the persons to take upon themselves this responsibility, who cannot make it clear that he is wrong. How do they know but he is right, if they cannot see the difference between his views and the truth?

On the other hand, it is much more probably urged against him, that what he says is so false, so evidently wide of the truth, that on this account he ought not to be heard. To this I may say that if his views are so glaringly false, their fallacy may be all the more easily shown; nay, if they are so erroneous, they will be seen to be erroneous, without showing. At all events, this exclusion of him from the pulpits to which he was once admitted — this refusal of an occasional exchange with him once or twice in a year is, to say the least, not very wise policy, as the result bears witness. He has been invited, I hear, to go and settle in Boston. This he has declined doing; but he has consented, I understand, with the consent of his own people, to preach once every Sunday in that city. His ability and eloquence are sufficient to attract large numbers around him. The interest in his preaching in general, and in his peculiar views in particular, must, of course, be heightened by the position into which he has been forced. And in the exposition of his opinions he will have the great advantage of having secured in a measure the sympathy of his hearers beforehand, and his influence will, of course, be increased.

But you will ask, What are his opinions? I reply that all his writings, of which I have any knowledge, evince the strongest faith in the great moral principles of Christianity, in those practical truths which are presented in the Sermon on the Mount, and in the teachings of Christ generally. These truths he illustrates and enforces with no ordinary boldness and power. His heart comes out with his words. He may offend good taste occasionally, and sometimes his style may not be the simplest, but it is evident that he writes and speaks from strong personal conviction. He aims to regenerate, enliven and exalt the human soul. It is not to be questioned that the eternal principles of justice, holiness and love, are more precious in his eyes than gold, yea, than fine gold. He reverences also the spirit of Christ. Thus he speaks of Christ in a recently published discourse: "Jesus is the greatest person of the ages; the proudest achievement of the human race — he taught the Absolute Religion — Love to God and man. That God has yet greater men in store I doubt not; to say this is not to detract

from the majestic character of Christ, but to affirm the omnipotence of God. When they come, the old contest will be renewed — the living Prophet stoned ; the dead one worshiped. Be that as it may, there are duties he teaches us far different from those most commonly taught. He was the greatest fact in the whole history of man. Had he conformed to what was told him by men ; had he counseled only with flesh and blood, he had been nothing but a poor Jew ; the world had lost that rich endowment of religious genius, that richest treasure of religious life, the glad tidings of the one Religion, Absolute and True. What if he had said — as others, ‘ none can be greater than Moses — none so great ! ’ He had been a dwarf ; the spirit of God had faded from his soul ! But he conferred with God, not men ; took counsel of his hopes, not his fears. Working for men, with men, by men, trusting in God and pure as Truth, he was not scared at the little din of Church and State, and trembled not, though Pilate and Herod were made friends only to crucify him, that was a born King of the world. Methinks I hear that lofty spirit say to you or me, Poor brother, fear not, nor despair. The goodness actual in me is possible for all. God is near thee now as then to me ; rich as ever in truth, as able to create, as willing to inspire. Daily and nightly He showers down his infinitude of light. Open thine eyes to see, thy heart to live. Lo, God is here.”

This will suffice as an example of Mr. Parker’s mode of speaking in regard to Jesus Christ. Thus he believes. But he does not believe in the miracles of the life of Christ. He questions the whole New Testament history. I understand him to believe in the genuineness and authenticity of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and of the Epistles of Paul, because, as I suppose, he cannot, as no one can, resist the celebrated argument for these which Paley has exhibited in that matchless work, the *Horæ Paulinæ*. But the Gospels he distinctly declares he puts little faith in, especially where they narrate the extraordinary events of the life of Christ.

And here after all that I have said, it may be asked : How is it possible to call one, holding such opinions, a Christian believer ? Has not the same question, I ask in return, been

raised again and again concerning Unitarians themselves? There are thousands at this very day, who are wholly at a loss to see how those, who reject the Supreme Divinity of Christ, can pretend to be Christians. The Unitarian, rejecting this doctrine, professes to be a Christian believer nevertheless, and holds his distinct and solemn profession of Christianity as good as another's, quoting the Apostle: "If any man trust to himself that he is Christ's, let him of himself think this again that, as he is Christ's, even so are we Christ's." Although we may not be able to reconcile the opinions of an individual with his professions of Christian faith, we are bound to respect that profession, and to believe that he renders to Christ, all that he honestly thinks Christ ever claimed. At all events, we must hold first and fast to that Christian spirit which is in imminent danger of being lost, the instant we deny the Christian name to such as breathe the Christian spirit. From that moment we are sure of being betrayed into all manner of injustice and uncharitableness; and thus Christ is wounded more fatally than by any errors of opinion.

It is needless for me to say that I utterly dissent from these peculiar views of Mr. Parker's. I hold him to be in what is to me a most manifest error. I know not where his eyes are that they are blind to the divine stamp of truth, impressed so deeply and so generally upon those brief sketches that we have of the life of Christ. I cannot find in his writings any arguments, that have to my mind the slightest weight, for the peculiar opinions on these points which he has expressed. I hold him to be under a great mistake. He does not see what I see in the narratives of the New Testament, and what, the more I read and examine this wonderful book, grows more and more luminous to me. I hold the Gospels to be perfect specimens of truth-telling. The character of Christ itself is not more truly wonderful, than these histories are for the simplicity and pervading truthfulness with which they are written. I have the liveliest conviction of the reality of all the principal facts which they record concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mr. Parker looks upon all the particular circumstances related of Christ, as mere fables fabricated by

one or another and designed to glorify Jesus. If this be so, how is it that mere fictions should harmonize so thoroughly, so profoundly with each other, and with the reality. The consistency and naturalness of the character of Christ, how perfectly are they preserved throughout! The miracles, were they fictions, would mar the character of Christ. It would be like mixing coarse clay with the finest gold. Now for the most part, the accounts of his miracles not only harmonize with the spirit of Jesus, they exalt our sense of the greatness of that spirit. On what occasion does he appear more godlike, more sublime, than at the grave of Lazarus. If that scene were a fabrication, it would belittle him, whereas in fact it gives us a new idea of moral greatness. Not the extraordinary physical power which he exerted on that occasion is the wonder, but the wonder is the sublime self-possession, the absence of all vain-glory, all parade, all self-reliance, this it is that we consider the great marvel and miracle of that portion of his history. Mr. Parker may reject the histories of Christ, but it is to those histories and to the particulars of those histories that he is indebted for the lofty ideas he has formed of the spirit of Christ.

But it is not to my purpose, now, to answer Mr. Parker. It could not be done within the limits of one discourse. But I believe that it can be done, and will be done.—that he is in an error, I have no doubt. But I would speak a word now for Christian justice, and freedom and love. I have not been moved by any feeling of personal friendship, for I never saw Mr. Parker, nor have I had any correspondence with him. For the truth's sake, let us be just, liberal and free. Let us not insult Truth by any unworthy dread of error. Let us hold fast to the only Christian standard—the spirit, the spirit. This is the one thing needful. This it is alone, by which men will be recognized by Christ, and accepted of God, and not by any matter of opinion. Where the Spirit of Jesus is, it will sooner or later lead us all to the Truth as it is in Jesus.

S E R M O N I I .

MATTH. XXII. 42.

WHAT THINK YE OF CHRIST ?

THE object of the special service, which is to be observed this morning, is, briefly, the commemoration of Christ. We would refresh and vivify in our hearts the grand idea of the Man of Nazareth. And why do we do this? Why do we commemorate Christ? I answer, as I have answered many times before, in the first place, for what he has done for us. Our whole condition, illuminated and blest by the simple and sublime truth, which he infused into the world, bears witness to our great obligations to him. And, secondly, for what he was. We commemorate him not only for his doing, but also for his being.

The question arises, What was he? What manner of being was Jesus of Nazareth? The subject, which this question opens to us, I have often in various ways considered; but the peculiar circumstances, to which I referred on the morning of the last Lord's day will, I trust, give to this familiar topic a new interest, and ensure your awakened attention. It is of great importance, if on no other account yet for the simple truth's sake, that we should have as distinct and living idea, as we may, of Jesus Christ. And I ask again, What was he? What manner of being was he?

For an answer to this question, it is very plain where we are

to go. Not to our fellow-christians; for from them we can get nothing but a confused mass of contradictory answers. We must go to the professed accounts which have come down to us, of the Life of Christ, in brief to the four Gospels. Whatever knowledge is to be obtained of Jesus Christ, is to be found here, or it is to be found nowhere. We have no other means of information.

Now there is one fact in reference to the four Gospels, upon which, I wish that your attention may be fixed once for all; because it is a fact altogether undisputed. No man, who has at all looked into the subject, or who has been in any degree qualified to form an opinion upon it, has ever questioned the fact, that these Gospels do contain some truth. I do not mean, merely, that they contain some moral and religious truth, for all the world freely and fully admits that they contain a great deal of truth of this description; but I mean that all admit that they contain some historical truth, some truth respecting the life as well as the teachings of Christ. Questions have been raised, and earnestly and laboriously discussed as to the date of the Gospels: when they were written, and as to their authorship: whether they really were written by the persons whose names they bear. But as to the fact, that they do contain some basis of historical truth, more or less broad, that there is in them a thread of truth, more or less attenuated, there has been no question. Even our friend and brother of whose opinions I spoke last Sunday, and the German school of theology, from which he appears to have derived those opinions, admit that there is some historical truth in the Gospels; that they are good in history, so far as the simple facts of his existence, his calling as a teacher, and his violent death are concerned. Here then is a point upon which we are all agreed. You may not think it much, but it is something. It affords common ground to start from, and it helps to simplify the whole subject. And the vital question now is, "How far are the Gospels true? To what extent are they to be depended upon?"

Before I endeavor to give this inquiry such a reply as may be given within the limits of a single discourse, there are two or three things to be considered.

If some have come to the conclusion that the Gospels contain only a small grain of historical truth, is it any wonder? Some have come to this conclusion. Nay, the fact cannot be disguised, that a great many appear to have leaped to this conclusion, fancying it to be somewhat more stable ground, than the mire of utter uncertainty into which they were sinking. I know from my own observation that this is the opinion, not of a solitary individual, but of numbers, who have been brought to it, not by the arguments of one writer or another, but by their own reflections on the matter, — whether their reflections, by the way, of which such an opinion is the result, have been sound and rational, is a question indeed upon which one may have very strong doubts. Still the fact that many have taken up with the idea that the four Gospels contain only the smallest possible quantity of historical truth cannot be denied.

And for my own part I cannot help thinking that the dread which is evinced at the publication of this idea, betrays the existence of a more general unbelief in the historical truth of the Gospels, than is openly avowed. Men do not fear what they consider has no force in it. Where a well-grounded conviction of truth is cherished, no alarm is felt at the expression of opposing opinions. They are regarded as mere shadows. But when no such conviction exists, when the faith, which men have in any point, is a mere matter of prescription and conformity, founded upon no conscious basis of reason, but only on early prejudices, then it must be guarded against every whisper of objection. It is like a long buried corpse, which so long as it has been carefully sealed up, has worn the beautiful semblance of life, but open the coffin, and let but a breath of the free air of heaven reach it, and it falls at once into a heap of dust. We read of portions of the earth so infested by ants, that those minute insects will sometimes eat out the heart and strength of all the timbers and joists of a dwelling, leaving it a perfect shell. Apparently it is as strong and sound as any other dwelling, but let the gentlest wind blow, and it is at once a ruin. To the inmates of such a house every cloud, though no

bigger than a man's hand, must be a terror. We have here a lively representation of that popular profession of Christian faith which men mistake for faith itself. A handsome substantial edifice to all appearances, but there is no soundness in its beams, no heart in the timbers, and its occupants tremble at the wild winds of heaven. If it were founded upon a rock, and built itself of solid stone, they would laugh at the gusts of Error, and cry, 'Let the wind blow, and sweep away the dust and freshen the stagnant atmosphere.'

Be this as it may, whether the want of faith in the historical truth of the Gospels be as prevalent as I have said or not, that the want exists there can be no doubt. And I ask again, is it any wonder that some should come to the conclusion that the four Accounts of the life of Christ, contain only a very small portion of historical truth? Is it not very natural that such an opinion should make its appearance? Consider how for long ages it has been insisted that the Gospels were plenarily inspired, written by the supernatural dictation of the Eternal Spirit of Truth, and that they are true to every word and letter. Such a pretension in behalf of these writings, made in the very face of the most obvious marks of human hands in their whole structure, must needs drive some to the opposite opinion. From the beginning of the world extremes have always produced extremes, and the believing too much is always sure to be followed by the believing too little. The history of human opinions has always been represented by the movement of a pendulum.

I have another remark to make. A distinguished English writer, a man who had a rare poetic eye, has declared, in reference to that celebrated soliloquy in Hamlet, beginning with "To be, or not to be, that is the question," that he was utterly unable to say whether it was good, bad, or indifferent, it had been so handled and pawed about by declamatory boys and men — it had been so torn from its living place and continuity, that it had become to him a perfectly dead member. Now, I say, the Scriptures have been treated in the same ignorant

and unworthy way. They have been commented upon in a narrow and childish spirit, wrested and tortured to make them conform to certain dogmas, of which their authors never dreamed, and in accordance with a false philosophy, as well as a false theology. There has been but little that is free, candid and generous, in the methods of exposition to which the Gospels have been submitted. Men have not taken them in hand to see what they really are and what they actually mean, but their object has been to make them speak the language of their poor prejudices and opinions. Of course, even after we see how false and unworthy this way of treating these books is, our minds are still embarrassed by the injurious associations which have fastened themselves upon the language, style, and whole structure of the Bible, and not one in ten thousand reads it with that freshness, and freedom, and candor, with which it would be read, if it were now for the first time put into our hands, a new book, which we had never before seen. On this account therefore we cannot be surprised, if candid and truth-seeking men should not be able to see the Gospels in their true character all at once. Now, although for these reasons it must of course be difficult to ascertain the precise character of these records of the life of Christ, yet, I am strong in the conviction, it is by no means impossible. And I return to the question, "How far are the Gospels true? To what extent are they to be depended upon?"

In considering the present question I do not think it at all necessary — at least it is not of the first importance, that we should fix the precise date of these four accounts of Christ, the very year when they were written. This cannot be done with any accuracy. And even if it could, it would not avail much one way or the other. Even if it could be proved to the general satisfaction that they were written the very year after the events, which they relate, took place, of what use would it be if the histories themselves did not bring with them the air and the marks of truth? On the other hand, what if it were shown that they were not written until twenty years or more

after the events related occurred. This is the date generally assigned to the Gospels by the learned. What then? The length of the interval between the happening of the events and the composition of these narratives of the events, cannot outweigh the evidence of truth which the narratives furnish in their whole style and structure, supposing them to contain such internal evidence.

If any one, by the way, is disposed to attach any importance to this long interval of twenty years, and to decide that little credit is to be given to accounts of events written so long after the events took place, let him consider, that, although these accounts were written so long after the occurrence of the things related, it stands to reason that although the story of the life of Jesus was not written until years had elapsed, it must have been told again and again. It must, in the very nature of the case, have constituted one of the chief topics of the conversation and preaching of the personal friends of Jesus. They must have dwelt continually upon the incidents of his life. When they sat down to write out their recollections, they did not have to task their memories to recall things which had long lain forgotten in their minds, buried under other and different things. They simply transcribed or put down in an enduring form what had been related orally for years. But whether this explains the case or not, it is of small moment comparatively, whether a narrative of certain events can be traced up to within twenty years, or two hundred years of the events related, if it bears upon it that impress which truth alone can give, and which no lapse of years can obliterate:

As it is not of essential importance to fix the date of the Gospels, neither do I hold it essentially important that we should settle their authorship, that we should be satisfied that they were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. For the establishment of this point, you must rely upon the fallible authority of others entirely, or enter upon a laborious course of inquiry, for which the common avocations of life afford you but little opportunity, and even then you would still have to depend on human authority. And besides, what if it were proved,

beyond reasonable question, that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, wrote the Gospels which bear their names, or that they did not write them? In either case, what difference would it make? If these accounts are in themselves incredible, no mere human authority could make them otherwise. On the other hand, if they bear the Divine signatures of truth, those marks which belong only to truth and nature, then the names of their authors can add to them but very little weight. And further, we know very little indeed of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If indeed they are, as I believe, the authors of the Gospels, then we know something of them through these works of theirs. In fact we learn more of them through their works, if these are the works, than from any other quarter. But then in this case it is their works that give weight to their names, and not their names to their works.

Putting aside therefore the questions concerning the date and authorship of the Gospels, as matters of secondary importance, as matters, which, even if settled, would not decide the great question for us, we must look into the Gospels themselves. It is conceded on all hands that they contain some truth. The question is, How much? I will briefly state my own belief in this particular, and the grounds upon which it is based.

I hold then that the accounts we have of the life of Jesus Christ, are *pervadingly* true, that we have in them the main substance, the principal facts of his history. In a few and by no means the most important particulars, there are errors, contradictions, misstatements. In one or two instances, ordinary events or striking coincidences of ordinary events are represented as extraordinary. There are traces in them of Jewish modes of thought and Jewish opinions. Still with all these abatements there is a substantial body of fact. And I learn from these records that there lived in Judea some eighteen hundred years ago, a personage in whose life and character the Divine wisdom and power, and love, were manifested as they have been manifested in no other mortal form, who was gifted with extraordi-

nary power, whereby by a simple act of his will he healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead, and rose himself from the grave, after having been crucified. I learn also many interesting particulars concerning the character of this wonderful individual, how he bore himself towards the poor and the sinful on the one hand, and the rich and honorable on the other, how he lived with his personal friends, and in all relations breathed a spirit of Godlike love, and walked among men like a very angel of Heaven, pouring out heavenly consolations, opening to human eyes the grandest views of the Providence of God, and kindling in the fainting, burthened heart of humanity the light of an undying hope. All this I believe is fully and may be most satisfactorily substantiated from the Gospels. I want no higher evidence than these furnish of these facts.

But it will be asked : What is the evidence which the Gospels furnish, beyond their bare assertion, of these facts? I answer, I find all the evidence I can possibly desire in the manner and form and air of these narratives. I do not know for instance, what the quality of honesty is, if that quality is not manifest, embedded in the whole tenor of these accounts. I am touched to the very heart by the singleness of mind which they so strikingly evince. They tell us of some remarkable event, and in the same breath, without any hesitation, they tell us that it was doubted and questioned by some of those who stood by and witnessed it. Of the most stupendous event in the whole history, the re-appearance of Jesus after his crucifixion, they relate that some, to whom he appeared, doubted whether it were he. And they give no explanation. I cannot resist the conviction that the authors of these histories had no earthly object but to tell the truth, whether it made for them or against them. There is no trace of any design to make out a case. And yet they do not seem to study honesty. They tell their story right on. This is one trait of these accounts, which admits of copious illustrations, and which any free-minded, truth-loving man, may verify for himself, but upon which I cannot enlarge now.

Another characteristic of the accounts of Christ is their consistency. On this point they seem to be utterly careless. They go on telling one thing after another, relating things concerning Jesus, which seem to be flatly inconsistent, but which upon further examination are found to be in perfect harmony. There is not a miracle, no, not a single miracle related in the New Testament, which so fills me with wonder as this one fact, that from these four accounts, brief sketches, disjointed as they are, bearing as they do so many traces of being the works of simple-minded, ignorant, prejudiced men, we can yet gather such a multitude of circumstances relating to Jesus that admit of being rounded into one beautiful whole, as natural as it is original ; so that the idea we obtain of the Man of Nazareth, is as complete and harmonious as one of those spheres rolling there in the heavens, and shaped into a perfect form by the hand of the Creator himself. If these narratives were mere fictions, fabrications of man, they would jangle and jar with each other in a thousand particulars. What but truth — who but God can make a story that shall harmonize with itself, and with all other truths, with all the other things of God ? I know very well that human genius has devised fictions that carry with them a wonderful air of truth. There is the celebrated Romance of Defoe's, known to all children. It is admirable and fascinating for the appearance of reality which it wears. But then the author, unquestioned as is his genius, had the scene all to himself, a desert island and one shipwrecked mariner, and he could invent circumstances to suit his purpose, and he sought to illustrate only the ordinary traits of an ingenious, stout-hearted man. But in this most wonderful of Books, the New Testament, we have a new and original person, a new specimen of humanity, such as the world had never witnessed, and his life passes in a crowd of men swayed to and fro by a host of conflicting prejudices and passions. His days are spent in the midst of a multitude of ever-varying and unexpected incidents. He comes in contact with the greatest diversities of character, and amidst all the changes of the scene, he is in perfect harmony with himself, and with the highest, and the profoundest truths

of things. I cannot—it is not in me to desire any more decisive evidence of the substantial reality of the things related in the four Gospels than is furnished by the beautiful and divine consistency of the life of Christ with itself and with all things.

Our friend, to whose opinions I alluded on the last Lord's day, while he has expressed strong doubts of the reality of nearly all the particulars related concerning Christ, confesses that there is a strong presumption that the loftiest sayings attributed to Jesus are genuine. Now what if it should appear that all the sayings, nay, all the acts as well as words ascribed to Jesus were, with very few exceptions indeed, of a truly lofty character, or were in perfect harmony with the unequalled elevation of his being? How then? Judged by this test, there is but very little, comparatively speaking, in the New Testament, that we cannot heartily believe. I do not mean to say that all that Jesus said or did was equally lofty, for that would hardly be natural. But I do mean that nearly everything that is recorded of Christ, bears the stamp of the same moral sublimity. And it is in the nature of the case that it should be so. The more ordinary circumstances of his life, his more common sayings, were not so likely to make an impression, not so likely to be remembered, as the loftiest of his words and deeds. And therefore, though the histories of his life are brief and imperfect, I do not believe that any very important event of his career, or any great saying of his has been omitted, or allowed to sink into oblivion. It is the manifest arrangement of nature, one of the decrees of God, that all great deeds and words should be perpetuated. Men are so constituted that they will not willingly let truth or goodness die. We are told that when Alexander the Great visited the tomb of the Grecian hero, whose exploits Homer had immortalized, the conqueror wished that he also might have such a poet to celebrate his renown. Idle was the wish. Do greatly, and thy deeds shall be sung. They will find their herald. Nay, as it has been well said, "great deeds will sing themselves." How clearly does

the history of Jesus illustrate this saying. He lived and led the life of a Son of God in the world, uttering words of immortal wisdom, doing the deeds of a celestial goodness, and though no poet was by, no cultivated men of genius, only poor, unlettered fishermen, men, who would have shrunk back with utter incredulity from the idea that they were destined to compose histories which should live through all time, and be read by a thousand kindreds, and tongues, and nations, yet the words and deeds of the man of Nazareth, fell into the hearts of those poor, ignorant men, and filled them as with the ravishing music of Heaven, and they could not but utter that music as they were able, and tell the divine story in their own rude way, and write it down in brief, uncultivated phrase. They could not keep silent. They opened their lips, and the glorious history of Jesus, in all its most important particulars burst forth upon the world. It sung—it is still singing itself. Happy the ears that catch the heavenly sound !

But how stands it, you will ask, with the miracles of Jesus ? Where is the evidence for the reality of those extraordinary events of his history, which are so obviously at variance with all our observation and experience ? My friends, I have maintained often, and do still maintain, that the same harmony, the same consistency which pervades the other portions of the Gospels, pervades the accounts which they contain of his miracles also. And the reason why this harmony is not perceived is apparent, I think, in the false, unphilosophical, and I may say, unscriptural idea or theory, which has been so vehemently insisted upon, of the nature and design of the extraordinary acts performed. It has been systematically and zealously taught that the miracles, in other words the wonders (for that is the whole meaning of the term miracle, a wonder,) it has been taught, I say, that the wonders of the life of Jesus were express violations of the laws and order of nature, taking place for the express purpose of revealing the interposition of God. Miracles, thus conceived of, are essentially incredible. What mortal man is acquainted with all the laws—with the whole order of Nature. And if we are ignorant on this point, as we

confessedly are, knowing but very little indeed of the laws of nature, how can we presume to say, that any event is a violation of these laws? It may vary widely from our experience. But is our experience commensurate with the whole order of nature? How do we know that it does not conform to laws, of which we have no knowledge? If we could only rid our minds entirely of the false theories concerning the nature of a miracle, which have so long and so widely prevailed, and come to the New Testament with a single desire to ascertain the facts therein related, we should see that the wonders of the life of Jesus, are living and inseparable parts of his history, that they belong to him, and harmonize with his whole being, as truly as do his words of forgiveness and mercy.

If there is a sound principle of thought and inquiry, it is that a new fact is not to be rejected simply because it is new and unprecedented, nor is it to be accounted an interruption of the laws of nature, but we are to take it for granted, that it is to be referred to some law, of which we have as yet no knowledge. This is the principle which is observed by all inquirers in the fields of science. They do not reject new facts because they are new, nor do they pronounce them violations of the laws of nature, because they contradict their experience. It is the mark of an uncultivated mind, that it rejects all facts, no matter how well authenticated, which do not accord with its own experience. A true philosophy teaches us to expect new and unprecedented facts in this great universe, where the circle of man's knowledge is so small; and the history of science is continually bringing us acquainted with new facts. What new glimpses are men obtaining of the wondrous relations of mind to mind, and of mind to matter! I say, therefore, that we are bound to come to the examination of the wonders of the life of Jesus, with no presumption against them, arising out of their novelty. Our sole business is to ascertain the facts, and we must endeavor to see whether they are in harmony with the character of Christ.

The Gospels, it is evident, represent Christ as possessed naturally of a wonder-working power. All that we have to determine is, Did he exercise this power in harmony with

all his own, and all the other powers of nature? Was the action of this power marked by the style, genius, spirit of nature and of God? But my meaning will be best shown by an example. Take the incident of the cure of the withered hand. Just consider the case. Jesus went into a synagogue, a Jewish place of worship—a Jewish church. The people crowded to see and hear him. There was a man present who had a withered hand. Jesus bade him stand forth. There was present, also, some of the higher class of the Jews, individuals who undertook to guide and rule in matters of religion. They were jealous of the power and popularity of this young Nazarene; and so blinded and depraved were they, that they watched Jesus to see if he would perform a cure on the Sabbath, and thus violate the sanctity of the day. To these individuals, who no doubt occupied a conspicuous place in the synagogue, Jesus turned and said, “Is it lawful to do well or to do ill on the Sabbath day—to save life or to kill?” Mark what a cutting force there was in this question. It is as if he had said, “Which is violating the Sabbath, you or I?—I who seek to do an act of mercy, or you who are cherishing an evil purpose? I, who would save life—or you, who would kill me?” They made no reply. How could they? And then, when Jesus had looked upon them with indignation, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he said to the man, “Stretch forth thine hand.” And he stretched it forth, and it was made whole, as the other. And how could he help stretching it out? Just put yourself in the place of that man. Imagine yourself standing in so commanding a presence, with a gazing excited crowd around you; and the rich and honorable and great quailing before the eye and silenced by the words of the young peasant of Nazareth, and you will see how the inmost springs of your life must have been stirred; and how you would have been prompted to put forth new and unwonted power. I cannot but believe such an incident as this, it is so perfectly in harmony with the dignified character of Christ. It shows him to us in a characteristic and commanding attitude. It is not the physical effect which he wrought upon the man’s limb that excites my wonder, but it is his own imperial and

godlike air. This it is that reveals to me the Divinity that was in Jesus.

Thus the wonders of his life are valuable as they illustrate him ; as they show what manner of man he was. Strike them out of his history, and you lose the means of estimating the greatness of his spirit — the godlike power of his character. They are, as his acts, parts of him. And his individuality is mutilated, and all but lost, if these facts are rejected. But seen in them, and through them, he rises before us the loftiest of all the sons of God, the beloved of the Infinite Father, one with God, and the Revealer of everlasting Glory.

Thus, brethren and friends, may he be seen and known by us, and when thus known his memory will be an inexhaustible fountain of life, and light, and salvation.